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Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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Redemption, A Survivor's Spiritual Journey
by Lillian Boraks-Nemetz

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Part 1- Wound

Autobiography
Wound
Echoes of Waste
Secrets of the Trees
Memory Tree
Transplant
It's not so Easy
Child Survivors
Surreal Silence
Nausea
Nightmare
Grotesque in Grey
Insomnia
Scenes from a Landscape
Isolation
Blind men
Broken Doll
Le Vierges blanche et noires
A Survivor on the Threshold of a new Century
Riddle of the Sphinx

Part 2 - Journey

Garden of the Dark Moon
Journey
Polish Nightingale
A Walk through the Warsaw ghetto
Jerusalem Street
Trees of Auschwitz
Stones of Treblinka
Cracow: the Dichotomy
Birthright
En Gedi
Dead Sea
Yellow Circle of Light
Moon Child

Part 3 - Healing

Atlantis: the Search

My Treeflower Friend

The Gardener of Children

Creek House in Winter

Ghost Children: the Healing

Laughing Skeletons

Redemption

The Desert

A Visit to my Father's Grave

Eclipse

The Dark Process of Light

The Eternal Flame

We, the Children

Passover

Meditation

Glossary

WOUND

I was born in Warsaw, Poland, next door to Nazi Germany where Adolf Hitler was pronouncing a death sentence on every Jewish child in Europe.

My few happy childhood years before the war were but a short preface to the Holocaust and its aftermath.

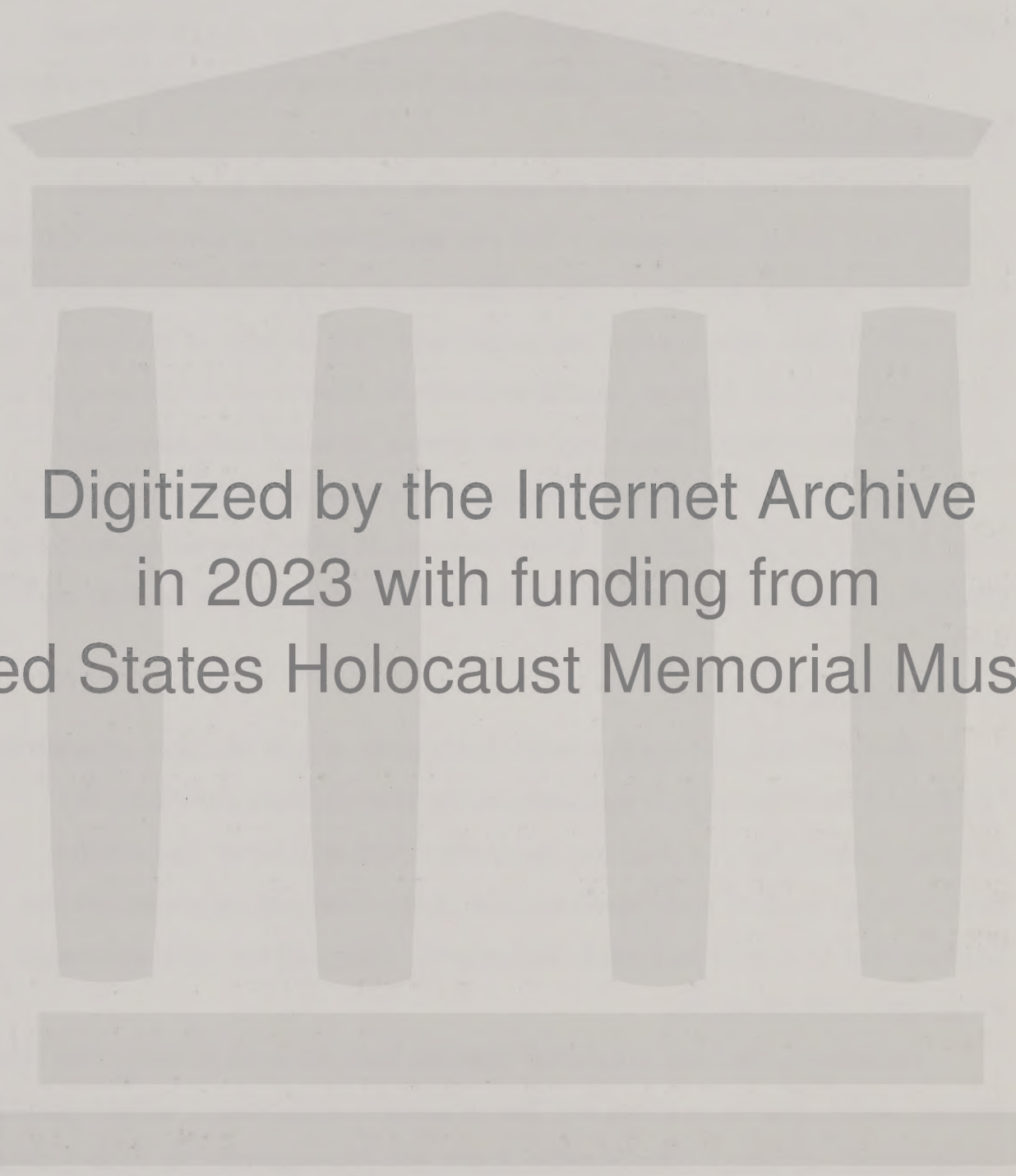
From 1939 until 1945 life in Poland was unbearable for the Jewish people. My own two years spent in the Warsaw Ghetto as a seven-year-old were fraught with anxiety and terror. We existed, enclosed by a ten-foot tall brick wall laced with broken glass pieces and barbed wire. The children of the Ghetto were victims of starvation, disease, and abandonment. Some were in the process of dying, their emaciated bodies lying in the streets, covered with newspaper.

In 1942 when the deportations began, my parents decided to send my sister and me out of the Ghetto. My three-year-old sister was smuggled out and taken to a village where she was to live with a Christian couple, as their own child.

Then my turn came.

My father brought me to a large check point, a guarded post between the Ghetto and the other side. It was patrolled by Nazi soldiers with rifles. We stopped at about two hundred feet away from there and father told me that neither he nor mother could come with me, that I must walk alone across the opening and not turn to look back. Reluctantly, I let go of his hand and began the longest walk of my life.

I walked to the other side while German soldiers were pointing their rifles into the centre, poised to shoot any Jew who ventured across. I walked alone on jellied knees, carrying a little brown suitcase and false papers. My eyes focused on the brassy glow of buttons on uniforms of the Polish police, who were also guarding that checkpoint. The German guards didn't shoot; rather they behaved as if no one was there. I learned later that my father had someone bribe them with leather gloves and jewelry.



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At the other end on the Christian side, a strange woman grabbed my hand. We ran to a railroad station, and boarded the train for a village called Zalesie where my grandmother lived.

I didn't see my parents for almost two years. I envisioned them in my nightmares, running for their lives through the sewers and Polish villages. Finally, one day, they came to my village, like two ghosts, trying to be as invisible as only ghosts can be. They told me that my little sister, Basia, had been informed on and had been taken away by the Gestapo. That night I prayed on my knees to God, and promised to be a very good little girl if He would only save my sister's life. But the next day we heard that she had been shot to death.

Sorrow and guilt became my constant companions because I could not forget the way Basia left our home in the Ghetto. That day I was very sick with scarlet fever and when my sister came over to hug me, I pushed her away and turned to the wall. I didn't know she was leaving for good, and I didn't even say good-bye.

During that awful time my grandmother, who lived with a Catholic man from Cracow as his Christian wife, took me in. She saved my life while endangering her own, because the punishment for anyone hiding a Jew was death. She was a brave and courageous woman. Throughout my life, my grandmother served as an example of someone whose love for me was unconditional and true.

Posing as Christians, my parents, my grandmother and I survived the war, while millions of others perished. I learned early that sometimes you have to lie in order to survive. A lie had to become truth and the truth a lie. But thankfully, during the years that followed, I didn't lose sight of the strong principles of truth and justice I had learned at home.

After the Russian liberation in the winter of 1945, we returned to ruined city of Warsaw. Our lives were shattered like the city itself, whose buildings were decimated by German bombs and fire. The city lay in ashes, as did millions of

Jewish lives.

Soon after the war we emigrated to Canada. The hardships of immigrant life coupled with the Holocaust experience produced yet another traumatic period in the years to come.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I was exiled
from your body's
deep dark sphere
to revolve naked and alone
seeking shelter
in strange hollow trees
and burnt forests
where wolf and wind
mock the sound
of the loneliest word

mama mama mama

WOUND

A flash of steel
along the tree trunk
marks its surface
like a fleur-de-lis
sharply engraved
on human skin

a nail of hate
wrenched
from the woodwork
carved by time's saw

falls like a comet
that wounds the soul
and tears the flesh

*The fleur-de-lis was once the brand mark of a criminal in France, circa 1475.

ECHOES OF WASTE

If we exist
in each other's memory
then we are only echoes now

voices buried alive
in a graveyard
where time wastes lives

one voice calls out
to the deaf and the soulless
who cannot hear
the shrieking
from prematurely sealed graves

the other apes
the thud of the earth
sinking into life's cavity
until all sound is stilled

SECRETS OF THE TREES

Trees of the forest
know their heart
and the heart of a man with an axe

people like trees
multiply their roots
water and light sustain them

water flowing through fertile valleys
created by God and man

light that fires
the eternal flame in a temple
or sprouts a murderous seed
in the heart

trees know
secrets of creation
and the secret of a man with an axe

MEMORY TREE

Tree gathers unto its rings
stories which it tells
in the silence of racing time:

infant blossoms
dreaming
in the branches

tree's sweet sap
falling
from green hair

blow of an axe
across the bark

cancer that twists the roots
and carves painful memories
into the trunk

TRANSPLANT

Roots
transposed
into foreign soil
at first reject its gift

roots
having sucked
the very blood of memory
sink into the new earth

migrant roots
pump their veins' green blood
through the starving heart of a dream

IT'S NOT EASY

They say
it's so easy
to sculpt love
at passion's wheel
into a statue of ourselves
as in "The Kiss"
or to arrange our bodies
inside an ornamental vase
like summer roses

they say
it's so easy
to forget our real needs
the needs of children
to forget the rules of games
the games of opening wounds
the wounds that even time
can't heal

tell them
it's not so easy
to void our eyes of tears--
souls of hiding places
sentences of lies
or to escape the prison
in our dreams
and crush the wall of fear

CHILD SURVIVORS

For the Child Survivors of the Holocaust

I drift among you
my brothers and sisters
a shadow of myself
a wisp of memory
recycling fragments
of an anguished past

in this room
we recall as in a seance
our former selves
denied a childhood

your voices
come out of the cellars
and the attics of time
and frozen nightmares
murmurings that stir
even these foreign walls
with sounds of guns
and death rattling
in the camps
and ghettos
that God forgot
and in His forgetfulness
left us with a ghostly memory

you my sister
recall your shame
at having stolen bread
when your body ached with hunger

and you my sister
with helpless anger
watched a sibling die

and you my brother
had to hide
away from your parents
while you my brother
died in Auschwitz

no childhood for us then
no schools no gardens
with a dog and cat
no neat kitchens
with mothers baking cakes

only time's catacombs
where we play hide and seek
sustain our memories

SURREAL SILENCE

At times I don't believe
that anyone really exists

people like vaporous shadows
drift through my brain

computerized dolls
of grey cellophane
blur the corners of my thought

when I reach out to touch them
they spawn rings
of human breath
on the icy walls of silence

NAUSEA

A beggar woman's face
wrinkled and dirty
like an old sheet
folds into a heap
despising despised

trapped inside her wrinkles
like fragrance in a withering bloom
lie memories scented with violets

NIGHTMARE

A lightbeam floods my pillow
dreams thin to consciousness
the night has bruised my mood

I am on the threshold
of a dire remembering
you stand on the other side of night
a figure of ice

stiff lips distorting stiff words
my pleading turns to frenzy

screams shake the furniture
fragments flood the floor

your voice thunders out of a cave:
yes you'd be better off dead!

I am falling falling
tall figures carry me into our old house
past our children who seem someone else's

you float towards me with a witch's nose
and a smile that narrows
into a black tooth

you slash a pear with a serrated knife
its juice turns to blood
on my skin

I am unable to move
am I-- are we dead?

a lightbeam floods my pillow
its length absorbs the empty space
beside me

it seems that in my waking hour
I am even more alone

GROTESQUE IN GREY

Technicolor life
carousels around my vault
of sacred things

below the lid
in the grey corner of 1942
lies my childhood skeleton
wearing an apocalyptic grin

INSOMNIA

The tooth of night
pierces my flowering dream
a black sunflower
bleeds inside my head

SCENES FROM A LANDSCAPE

A withered branch
on an ailing tree
claws at my window

in my room's arid desert
I burrow a path towards an exit

a glass robot
steps onto my path
and clasps his jagged hand
around my throat

pain vaults
through the window
like a shrieking cat

pain and glass
hail of blood
wash over the wounded tree

the glass robot
armed with a withered branch
leaves for another landscape

ISOLATION

Dumb grey room
I sit cemented
inside this sanctuary
words splintering in my throat

in the deaf courtyard
of my mind
I hear a pigeon's cry
the wailing of a tree
struck by a sudden wind

an echo of time
hurtling through space
confirms the nothingness
of being

BLIND MEN

men in their own gardens
dwell unseeing the jungle
and the desert of their day

fruit rots in clusters
naked trees humbly bow
to the earth in apology

the barren earth
like the eyes of the blind men
conceals the cremated flowers

BROKEN DOLL

She cries Mama
and dances the tightrope
life at one end- - death at the other

she has no bones left
only a soul of clay
mixed with tears and time's dust

soul that bleeds
at night in her dreams
of children terrorized
by those who think
their veins full of blue blood

they who have
no dreams of their own
and walk no tightrope

the mighty
who shout angry verdicts

the mighty
who build walls and prison bars

the mighty
whose computer hearts

and nuclear brains
feed poison
into the minds of dolls

broken dolls
who cry Mama!
and dance the tightrope
until the end

LES VIERGES BLANCHES ET NOIRES

J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage

Arthur Rimbaud from *Parade*

Blind idols on a vestal stage
toss snowballs at bleached walls
and catch white butterflies in
nets of black chiffon

at night the heavy smoke
from the burning theater of their dreams
fills the empty sockets
with tears black as mourning veils

when the electric eye of dawn
hurls its brilliant bulb
onto the bleeding alabaster
a kind passer-by will muse
about the statues' once white eyeballs
now smouldering coals
inside their ashen hearths

coals charred like the window
in a white cathedral
stained by the burning wings
of white butterflies
now black

A SURVIVOR ON THE THRESHOLD OF A NEW CENTURY

I mourn you my love
like a blackening glacier
cooling the sun's surface

our bodies charged
by their last round of fire and ice
spin on the earth's tilting axis

electric shocks
numb the crippling memory
as we dance through protocol

erotic artifice moulds us
into the stiffness of a new age
inhabited by clones

THE RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX

What walks on four legs
in the morning, two in the afternoon,
and three in the evening?

--Sophocles

The lake is a tub
of sunlight in blue mist
with ducks and a boat
of childhood whose oars shift
like the arrows of time

morning
the child merrily
splashes water at a duck

noon
the teen's restless fingers
pull at the feathers

evening
the adult hungers
for the plumpness of
young birds

screams of mama birds
explode the calm
as their babies' blood
spills over the setting sun

darkness squats
upon the lake

the moon glares
at the human riddle
as across its tired face
drifts the shadow of a savage

JOURNEY

After many years in Canada, I found much fulfillment in the pursuits of education, community work and the process of creative writing. Nevertheless, I continued to sense something deeply disturbing within me. Later still, I learned that the soul of a child survivor of the Holocaust will be forever scarred by tenacious and unforgiving memories..

These memories took me back to Poland in the summer of 1996. I had a compelling need to honour the memory of the millions of Jews who had perished in the ghettos and the camps; to honour the memory of the vanquished lives of my uncles, aunts, cousins; to return to the village where my sister lived and died; to pay my respects to the memory of my grandparents. This was going to be my own personal odyssey, a pilgrimage in search of redemption.

Firstly, I visited the area of what once was the Warsaw Ghetto. Today it is a residential and commercial section of town with nothing to remind anyone of its past, except for the few squat black granite monuments scattered throughout. I followed an old map of the streets that were still firmly etched in my mind from 1940. The visit brought back those terrible times in all their somber immediacy.

This Polish summer day is unbearably hot. Once again I can smell the stench of disease and death in these surroundings coloured by despair and fear.

Near the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Martyrs, are young girls sunbathing in bikinis, and couples sitting on benches seeking the cool shade of the trees. Heavy rock blares from a radio. A group of noisy young people runs by.

My mind, like a movie reel, rewinds time.

It's as in 1942. I hear shooting, the hollow pounding of black boots; the threat of imminent death hangs over us like a poisonous shroud. I walk among the ghosts of half-burnt buildings and through the once hidden bunkers of those courageous Warsaw Ghetto Fighters, who with meagre arms defied the Nazi war machine for three weeks in April of '43. They lost the battle, but their integrity won, for their brave spirit will live in all Jewish hearts forever.

I find the same streets with the same names, only different buildings now, and different people living inside them. Elektoralna! Miła! Here they are, these very streets stained with Jewish blood, punctuated with black granite memorials, honouring the heroes. There is one, on a hill, where once stood the building that housed the bunker of Anielewicz, the hero of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

I walk in a long, ghostly line of Jews, on to Stawki Street and Umschlagplatz. The place of deportations.

Umschlagplatz! On this hot summer day, when the temperature is in the nineties, the very sound and sight of this place chills me. This is the gathering place from where Jews, young and old, enticed by the Nazis' offerings of bread and jam, boarded the cattle cars for concentration camps. This is the place to which I am marching with my family, and from where we miraculously escape.

A piece of the brick Ghetto wall still stands at Umschlagplatz, next to a monument, built like a square room with a bench for meditation, beneath the open sky. A woman with a shopping bag walks slowly on the hot pavement. She takes a shortcut through the "room," with an unaware, mindless smile on her lips.

Silence, indifference hangs over Umschlagplatz.

Next stop: Treblinka. We drive to the end of a peaceful country road to the remnant of a railroad track used by those cattle cars filled with humans. We follow the railroad track until it breaks off and disappears.

"This is the end of the road," announces the Polish taxi-driver.

And it is. Tall rocks stand scattered throughout the place, as if someone

had petrified human beings into pillars of stone. Thousands of winged creatures eerily buzz beneath them, creating a humming moan in my ears. This is a desert ravished by unanswered questions, haunted by ghosts, subdued by Polish authorities and seemingly abandoned by Jews. This place has its own peculiar silence, a silence of neglect and of waiting.

Later, an antidote, when I visit a place of joyful significance: my grandfather's villa, where I spent many happy hours during the early childhood years before the outbreak of war. The Rose Villa had made an indelible imprint on my memory - the forest and the sunflower garden, surrounding what once was our family summer home. Here, even now, I find momentary peace and a skeletal trace of my roots. The silence here is serene, punctuated by the whispering breeze and birdsong. But the villa is no longer ours. The government took it away and rented it out to strangers, whose hostile demeanor soon casts a shadow on my visit.

"There was nothing here before we came ," mutters a toothless old man. "Nothing." "We will buy this from the government ," says a hostile sounding youth.

Next, my lawyer and I hasten to a hearing at the Polish court. The lawyers here are courteous and helpful. The judge is a younger person seemingly unaware that the Holocaust ever happened. I explain that my grandfather, to whom the villa belonged, had been shot to death in the Warsaw Ghetto. The judge wants to see proof, a death certificate.

I explain in my broken Polish, that in those days bodies of murdered Jews were transported on wooden carts and buried in a common grave. Thousands died and no one knew where and when and how exactly their bodies were disposed of.

The Judge, a Polish advocate of justice, stares at me uncomprehendingly. Silence ensues and nothing further is said. In a few days we hear from our Polish lawyer that we may be able to get our property back, providing we can

establish the proof of my grandfather's death. How can we do that?

We take a train to Crakow. It is a lovely city sprawled on the Vistula (Wisla) river, an old, peaceful ribbon of water flowing by the ancient castles and cathedrals.

Nearby is the death camp of Auschwitz - Birkenau.

The roadside to Auschwitz is lined with Christian crosses and religious statuettes, housed in tiny wooden structures filled with flowers. The tour bus is filled with English and Asian tourists. The guide is a pleasant Pole, describing the plight of the Polish people and the gypsies. After he learns that I am a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, he includes the plight of Jews.

Death block no 11. The ovens. The tubular containers for bodies in front of the ovens. The word "horror" is inadequate. All language ceases to exist.

Then the showcases. Jewish Prayer Shawls. Masses of hair. I see my own hair reflecting in the showcase glass. Through my own glasses, I see thousands of *Their* glasses. My own feet, heavy like clay, shuffle by the thousands of *Their* shoes.

I view the piles of old brown suitcases marked with Jewish names: "Marie Kafka," "Franz Engel," "Hana Fuchs," and so many more. I search for a name of a lost relative.

Outside, at the execution wall, people are taking pictures. Here, even the fresh bouquets of flowers propped against that wall seem to wilt in front of my eyes and sink into the earth.

Even the trees are abnormal here. They seem barren of leaves in July, Their branches cropped like the heads of the prisoners' once were. There is a cafeteria here where grim-faced visitors find refuge from the horror in a cup of hot coffee. A little taste of normalcy for someone who has just walked out of a death cell. Others are buying books in a bookstore, where only German and Polish is spoken by the salesperson. There is a shortage of Jewish books. An escapee from the camp is present to sign his new book. He is not a Jew.

Where are the Jews? The Survivors? Jewish writers with their experiences? Jewish voices of those who know? Our spiritual leaders?

Nothing. Only silence -- a kind of waiting for the Jewish presence to speak the truth and words of healing to the visitors. Not only to the groups who come from Israel and America, accompanied by their own rabbis and holy services, but to those who come alone to pay their respects to the dead.

I feel spiritually depleted, naked and abandoned. There is no one here to help the despair of the child I carry within me.

Finally Kazimierz. A ghostlike quarter in a section of Cracow. It is now mostly inhabited by Poles, who live around the deserted Jewish synagogues, homes and shops, as if the Jews, who were once a vibrant community in this place, had never existed. In a tourist manual called "Krakow," there is a description of the vast changes in Kazimierz, which states that, *"although the Jewish tradition is omnipresent it does not overshadow the everyday life."*

The synagogues in this small, once Jewish quarter, are splendid in their architecture and historical content. These magnificent ghosts stand empty and silent, disturbed only by cars riding by and people stepping over the stones of Jewish history.

On the other side of Cracow, Polish life and history abound with churches, castles and cafes filled with people. Stores rich in goods, and people buying and selling in the market places where stall shelves are lined with dolls. Wood carved statuettes of Jewish Hassidim, poor replicas of those who once lived in Kazimierz. With sad faces and bowed figures, they stand propped up on a shelf, like the stones of Treblinka, the silent remnants of the once rich Jewish presence in Krakow.

I return to Kazimierz. In the midst of hopelessness a miracle! I find a Jewish bookstore hidden away in a courtyard and a restaurant with Klesmer music. As I sip coffee, listen to the music and examine the cassettes of Jewish music I purchased at the bookstore, a curious light penetrates my dark thoughts.

Even here in this land, hostile to us Jews, there are remnants of us striving for survival, so that our Jewish roots may endure. And they will endure, if we who survived do all we can to nurture the memory of our ancestors and of the loved ones who perished.

GARDEN OF THE DARK MOON

Each night
an ebony moon
rises on my horizon

it beckons
the lonely traveller
to its twilight garden

I glide
towards it
a dreambird on paper wings
and disappear
into the ink of yesterday

at dawn
the ebony moon fades
into a canvas of memory

skeletons
of sunflower children
dance on the horizon

JOURNEY

The Helsinki pier
is walled off by fog
but the glimmering lights
from the opposite shore
illuminate the spirit

St. Petersburg
pulls like an icon
to my Grandmother's place of birth
her beginnings -- my roots

I hear
a message on the waves of the gulf
whispering "come, come"

my mind
cups the water in which I see
Grandmother's smiling face
and a love greater than life
overflows

THE POLISH NIGHTINGALE

A bird outside my window
sings out its morning heart

the nightingale does not classify
those for whom it sings
nor calls its Jewish listeners
foreigners or undesirables
as did a journalist this morning
in a Warsaw paper

those who come here from far away
Jews like me
seek only shade beneath
the trees of Saxon and Krasinski Park
and long to trace
in each cobblestone
the bloodied footsteps of our past

there is no one here now
only the Polish nightingale
singing as if its heart might break

and I know the song of a heart
torn from its roots
rising to be heard again
in a foreign land

A WALK THROUGH THE WARSAW GHETTO

In the Warsaw of 1996
rock music pounds
the pavement on Mila street

who is the girl in a bikini
tanning next to the memorial of Anielewicz?
and the woman with a shopping basket
cutting through Umschlagplatz?

the sun shines as before
at the monument to the Ghetto Martyrs
and the dog barks

humans stroll the ghetto desert
seeking shade while history
smoulders beneath their feet

I stumble on the year 1942
air is still on the streets of death
where they have long since built houses
made love and parked cars

life is a museum of oblivion
here -- all the way to the trains
where thousands once gathered
to receive the bread and jam of affliction

JERUSALEM STREET**Aleje Jerozolimskie, Warsaw, Poland**

The animal that haunts me
has a skin of charred cement
and eyes of broken glass

I trace its spirit
in the crevices of hard flesh
and sharp edges

as I draw near
my own blood pulses
into the veins
of Jerusalem Street

through its artery
I drill a passage
towards the child
who blossomed here once
then died behind the ghetto wall

TREES OF AUSCHWITZ

If trees could speak
we'd know the truth
for humans lie to please a crowd

trees and holy statues
line the road to Auschwitz
no stars of David

silence
lines the road to Auschwitz
and trees can't speak

the museum of death
neatly exhibits its collections
of unsightly artifacts

human hair
shoes and glasses
travelling bags
Hebrew prayer shawls
cans of poison gas
and ovens

the guide is kind
talks about the gypsies
the suffering of Polish priests
and other Poles

on occasion he mentions Jews
thank you sir for your omissions
is it you feeding lies to tourists?

if only there were someone here
to say Kaddish to help the living
if only trees could speak!

STONES OF TREBLINKA

Stone figures
stand scattered in a field
abandoned by time

Janusz Korczak's
eyes are everywhere
deep and grave
as the earth that buries him
with his flowers, his children

I stand among the stones
unable to comprehend
the ashen silence
of this cemetery without graves- -
dry memory
without remembering

suddenly I see
a flock of birds
rushing to imbue
these monuments with life

I place my ear
to the webbed air and hear
souls humming
humming

I retrace their steps
head lowered
feet caught in a shroud of weeds
concealing the tracks
by which my people came
and never left

CRACOW: THE DICHOTOMY

1. The Crakow Market - Krakowski Rynek

On this side of Crakow
ancient bastions
castles and churches
cradle the great Market Square

mindless of history
the visitors lounge
in cafés under red umbrellas
swilling down golden rivers of beer
cooling their palates
with mountains of ice cream

in the arcades
shoppers mob the countless
counters of folk art:
hand-carved boxes and strands
of amber warming the eye
the neck the wrist

Polish dolls
with yellow braids
and flowery dresses smile and dance

next to the shelf of dolls
estranged and still
dressed in black coats
and Hasidic hats

some hold a violin
wear a tallis and are bent in prayer
some gaze with torpid eyes
at the visitors who wonder
why none smile

2. The Ghost Town Of Kazimierz

On this side of Cracow

A ghost town unravels
like a ball of grey wool disappearing
into sunlight as if it never was

people walk in silence
stepping in the footsteps
of those before them -- footsteps
of the Hasidim silenced by the Nazis

here is another market square
now dead but once alive
with the voices of women
men children and rabbis

the streets
unfold like the pages
of the Hebrew Bible:

The Street of Isaak
The Street of Josef
The Street of Jakob
The Street of Moses
The Street of Ester

here nothing has changed
except the people

synagogues stand empty
in the oblivion of 1996
silent like the trees

like the wooden figures
of the Hasidic dolls
in the Cracow Market
on the other side

BIRTHRIGHT

In a Polish village
roams the ghost
of a Jewish child
seeking a lost garden

where sunflowers grow
from children's ashes
their darkened faces
crowned by yellow dust

where wild roses climb
along a trellis
towards a new century

where sweet jasmine
smells of childhood
and the pine forest offers
a gift of shade

the ghost lingers
by the rusted gate
but it is locked
and the key rests buried
in the secret testimony
of the trees

EN GEDI

And David went up from thence,
and dwelt in strong holds at En Gedi

1 Samuel, 24

All time
flows through the arteries of the earth
twisting into one knot --
En Gedi

all water
falls into a giant stream
thundering against the ancient mount
of En Gedi

in the silver eye
of a shepherd's spring
by the leaves' opal fire
lovers entwine on a marble rock
at En Gedi

it was then I knew
how a moment of love
can induce the whisper of God
to dissolve matter and fill life's hollow
with nature's heart

En Gedi
pulsating above
the fleshy ark of the world

DEAD SEA

In this aquatic cemetery
we drift side by side
covered in oil
surrounded by black palms

we drift effortlessly
in a hot water desert
still and eternal

we love pregnant with passions
barren of touch

we drift controlled
by the encircling dangers
of this place without exit

between our bodies
a current of distance
like a smoking warhead
generates the miracle
of our souls merging

we drift aching with anticipation
now is the time for opening wounds
while the night continues to carve
two ominous pillars of salt

YELLOW CIRCLE OF LIFE

My world
is constant as it orbits
the sun

memories surface
at the tip
of the paint brush

petals
in shades of yellow
circle the black orb
of my childhood

MOON CHILD

Moon child
my twin soul reflected
in the sky

descend the starry gardens
of your dreams into my cave
where demons seethe
like festering wounds

pierce the darkness
with the sharp edge
of your fiery blade

guide the one who weeps
into the cradle
of your secret heart

HEALING

We the children, who survived the Holocaust, had no language with which to describe our visions of terror. We simply felt and observed, remaining silent like trees.

There are no easy cures for sores that cannot heal, nor is there language for the atrocities of the Holocaust. The damage is too great to describe, and words are simply inadequate. However a process of healing has begun. Today the child survivors are no longer silent. We speak about the horrors of the Nazi persecution. We speak our truth to the new generation of students in the elementary and secondary Schools, and they respond with understanding and compassion. Thus the chain of silence is finally being broken in Europe, North America and around the world.

Emotions, such as those brought on by my travels, are probably alien to the young people born in North America. The walk of the survivors is long, through the bleak and dry desert. It is the walk of the lost, forever seeking an oasis with a fresh spring like the one at En Gedi, pulsating with life above the Dead Sea.

Although my travels to Poland and Israel were healing journeys, the seed of my personal redemption took root while writing my novels and poems; while teaching, sharing my story, and never ever forgetting.

WE, THE CHILDREN

Written at The Lost Communities at Yad Vashem,
Jerusalem, July 1993

How did we get to Jerusalem
from There?

we the Children
who stood transfixed
at the edge of an apocalypse

who travelled life
through silence
though memories
of shtetls ghettos villages and camps

thirsty for the past
we cast our shadows
upon these ancient walls
drawing blood from memory

we who pursued life
through death
rush rush
to behold a vanished world
before the sun
sets on Jerusalem
and annihilates our shadows

ATLANTIS: THE SEARCH

Before we rise from the sea
let the sea-weed
tow you to my island

let the crater's lava tongue
fire the words of our song

let the earth part so that heaven
may pass unseen

and we will trace the levels of time
through the veined roots of trees
and fossil-laced rocks
where lovers once dwelt
on the isle of spring

so engendered in the dust
and the darkness of our search
let us wait

and we shall rise from the sea
when a garden of sleep
bursts fiery green
from the smouldering pores
of this branded star

MY TREEFLOWER FRIEND

For Mary Seeman

It's a long way
dear friend
from root to blossom
through black earth
mudpools of dung
tunnels of stench and
buried trash

it's a long way
dear friend
through the green stem
to light
to the truth of knowing
what treeflowers know
from their first spring root

THE GARDENER OF CHILDREN

In memory of Dr. Janusz Korczak

Antoine de Saint-Exupery once wrote that there seem to be no gardeners for men. This poem is dedicated to one such gardener, Janusz Korczak, a pediatrician, who having spent his whole life caring for orphan children, sacrificed it for the two hundred Jewish orphans of the Warsaw Ghetto, when he marched with them through the Ghetto streets to cattle cars leaving for Treblinka, where he and the children perished. In the last entry of his Ghetto Diary, he wrote, "I am watering flowers..."

For whom did the flame burn?
the light that led a man to his destiny
a garden of children growing among weeds
and vile insects poised
to annihilate the seed of Abraham

relentless in his toil
he cultivated his orphaned blossoms
so they might thrive
how was he to crush the locusts
gathering for a feast?

one day the sky blackened
as their masses descended
and turned the garden of light
into the garden of darkness

on humanity's bleakest night
he gathered his children for the last time

and marching with them
along the Via Dolorosa
of the Warsaw Ghetto
beneath the stars of Bethlehem and David
he warmed them with his heart's flame

and that flame still burns among the ashes
a beacon of hope
for the children of the world

CREEK HOUSE IN WINTER

A winter tree
above the frozen creek
strains against the frenzied wind
waiting for redemption

an empty house
hidden by darkness
waits like a forgotten maestro
for the music of the waters to begin
for the children to return

GHOST CHILDREN

For the Hidden Children of World War II

You were not to be seen
you were not to be heard
you were not to exist
you were ghosts without a name

you hid among cobwebs roaches and rats
your nostrils filled with mildew
your ears with Nazi cries:

Verboten! Jude! Raus!
you froze and ice filled
the furrows of your hearts
and so you lived
for almost fifty years
ghostlike in your adult lives

but the Master Time
purged his dour self and restored
the past where human predators
are only shadows now

out ghost children,
says he, leave the catacombs of time
replant your stolen gardens
in the sanctuary of the past

*and cleanse them in your fertile minds
with the tears from
your thawing hearts*

LAUGHING SKELETONS

For my sister Basia

Night has flooded me with memory
an ink wall stands
between illusion and reality

two skeletons
arm in arm parade along
the walkway of the sky
their laughter moves the stars
to land upon my dreaming eyes

my murdered sister
my sweet skeleton child
I never said good-bye

I welcome you
into my home below the earth
below the roots of trees and others' graves
to another sky where once upon a time
beyond the fourth dimension
in the fifth house of the moon
You and I will meet again!

we shall laugh across the sky
and make the shooting stars
land inside the hollows of our eyes

REDEMPTION

The green eye of the forest
is benevolent and fierce

beneath the firs
filaments of moss
offer comfort and repose

a rare bird
the last of its kind
sings on a leafy branch
mindless of the predatory claw
in the bush below

when the paw
arches and arrows through the air

the bird stops in mid-song
and disappears forever

sap turns to blood
leaves crumble to the earth
a sparrow hovers over its eggs

redemption
in a gown of green lace
rustles among the ferns

even here in the kingdom
of trees and birds
murder and rebirth reign

THE DESERT

for Chris Reid

A tree stands in the desert
ripe with leaf buds
curled embryos
in shells of sand

out of the crack
in my desert
I see a crowd of people
with limbs entangled
by an endless cord

in the middle of the desert
there is a stream
nestling in a patch of green

in the stream
there is human life unlived:
a man of sand damned
in his oasis

a bird from the sky
alights on the sandman's back

wind heaves the sand
as the oasis and the sandman

fly away with the bird

alone in my desert

I watch caravans of trees

hung with human burden

and search the sky

for a bird

A VISIT TO MY FATHER'S GRAVE

Two crimson flowers
against a tombstone--
life knocking on the door
of a dead heart

time's massive step
cannot erase the love
of an orphaned child
left to roam the desert
for forty years

years like grains of sand
each filled with tears
of dry injustice

two crimson flowers
I plant for you my father
among these grains of sand

one for love
one for memory

ECLIPSE

The sun rises
but the forest dims

bushes sag
beneath the human burden

am I blind
or are these trees blackening
with old blood?

frightened birds
flutter through my brain
questioning the safety of their space

I want to gather
this forest into me
and warm it with my own sun

THE DARK PROCESS OF LIGHT

At night
I drift away
into an ocean
of indifference

behind my eyelids
a lighthouse lamp
flickers memories

in the dream
massive mountains
heave unspoken sadness

in the dream
runaway rivers
flood my home

when morning
covers night's face
with a veil of white mist
I return on light's wing

THE ETERNAL FLAME

What flickers
in the dark
what place
have I approached?

fifty years
I wandered the desert
of my God

fifty years
I lived inside the dune
of memory

and now
as the sand shifts
and darkness falters
I see a sword-like flame
piercing the constant night

PASSOVER

At dawn
clouds filled with atomic power
explode into the children's dreams

the livid sky
veined in light
spews dying birds

a murmur
swells the universe
as swarms of souls rise into
a thunderous call for justice

MEDITATION

In my silent garden
of atonement
I court God

dark thoughts
line the green pews
of the temple

they whisper
of time's passage
and the destruction within

from their soulful eyes
flow tears of sorrow

from the moistened earth
white lillies blossom
like holy prayers

Glossary

Anielewicz - Heroic fighter of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

Bread and Jam of affliction - In the Warsaw ghetto, Nazis promised the starving Jewish people bread and jam to lure them onto the trains leaving the Umschlagplatz.

Auschwitz - Nazi extermination camp in Poland.

Cracow (Krakow) - An ancient city in Poland.

Dead Sea - A sea in Israel whose waters have healing powers.

Dovening - A Jewish practice of swaying back and forth during prayer.

En Gedi - A natural fresh water spring surrounded by caves above the Dead Sea, where King David, then a shepherd, hid from King Saul.

The Ghetto Martyrs, the Jewish heroic fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto, who in 1943 defied the Nazis, with meagre arms, and held them off for about three weeks.

Hasid - An ultra religious Jew.

Janusz Korczak (Yiddish: Henryk Goldszmidt) - A pediatrician and writer of children's stories who dedicated his life to orphan children, both Christian and Jewish. In spite of being given a reprieve by the Nazis, Korczak chose to accompany his 200 children to Treblinka where they all perished.

Kaddish - Jewish Prayer for the Dead.

Kazimierz - A Jewish quarter of Cracow before World War II.

Michalin - Village in Poland, now a suburb of Warsaw.

Tablets of Splintered Stone - the Ten Commandments, stone tablets given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai.

St. Petersburg - A Russian city on the River Neva.

Shtetls - Small Jewish towns or villages in Eastern Europe, wiped out by the Holocaust.

Stawki Street - Location of the Umschlagplatz.

Tallith - Jewish prayer shawl.

The Temple - In Judaism, it is the most holy dwelling place of God. First built by Solomon, the Temple marks the centre of Jewish faith. In present-day Jerusalem, the remaining section is known as the Western or Wailing Wall, a place of prayer and meditation.

Treblinka - Nazi extermination camp in Poland.

Umschlagplatz - (German for 'gathering place') In the Warsaw Ghetto, a train depot used for the deportation of Jews to the death camps.

Warsaw Ghetto - 1939-1943, an area of Warsaw sealed off by a ten-foot wall, behind which Jews had to live in poor and dangerous conditions imposed by the Nazis.

Lenski File to appear in the summer of 2000.

Her new collections of poems *Redemption: A Survivor's Spiritual Journey* will be published in the summer of 2000, by Ronsdale Press.

She is currently working on her fourth novel.

In 1989, Lillian co-founded the Holocaust Child Survivor Group of Vancouver, BC, which she chaired for four years. She is a board member of the Holocaust Center for Education and Remembrance, and a participant in its Outreach Program. She gives frequent talks on the Holocaust and racism to students of elementary and secondary schools.

Lillian Boraks-Nemetz is also a member of the BC Writers' Federation, CCWIL (Association of Children's Writers and Illustrators), the Canadian Writers' Union and the UBC Alumni Association.

She gives poetry and prose readings at various schools and libraries.

